



Volunteering and its Surprising Benefits

How Giving to Others Makes You Healthier and Happier



With busy lives, it can be hard to find time to volunteer. However, the benefits of volunteering are enormous to you, your family, and your community. The right match can help you to reduce stress, find friends, reach out to the community, learn new skills, and even advance your career. Giving to others can also help protect your mental and physical health. Learn more about the many benefits of helping others and find tips on getting started.

Why volunteer?

Volunteering offers vital help to people in need, worthwhile causes, and the community, but the benefits can be even greater for you, the volunteer. Volunteering and helping others can help you reduce stress, combat depression, keep you mentally stimulated, and provide a sense of purpose. While it's true that the more you volunteer, the more benefits you'll experience, volunteering doesn't have to involve a long-term commitment or take a huge amount of time out of your busy day. Giving in even simple ways can help others those in need and improve your health and happiness.

Volunteering: The happiness effect

Helping others kindles happiness, as many studies have demonstrated. When researchers at the London School of Economics examined the relationship between volunteering and measures of happiness in a large group of American adults, they found the more people volunteered, the happier they were, according to a study in *Social Science and Medicine*. Compared with people who never volunteered, the odds of being “very happy” rose 7% among those who volunteer monthly and 12% for people who volunteer every two to four weeks. Among weekly volunteers, 16% felt very happy—a hike in happiness comparable to having an income of \$75,000–\$100,000 versus \$20,000, say the researchers.

Adapted with permission from *Simple Changes, Big Rewards: A Practical, Easy Guide for Healthy, Happy Living* (http://www.health.harvard.edu/special_health_reports/simple-changes-big-rewards-a-practical-easy-guide-for-healthy-happy-living), a special health report published by Harvard Health Publications.

Benefits of volunteering: 4 ways to feel healthier and happier

1. Volunteering connects you to others
2. Volunteering is good for your mind and body
3. Volunteering can advance your career
4. Volunteering brings fun and fulfillment to your life

Benefit 1: Volunteering connects you to others

One of the better-known benefits of volunteering is the impact on the community. Volunteering allows you to connect to your community and make it a better place. Even helping out with the smallest tasks can make a real difference to the lives of people, animals, and organizations in need. And volunteering is a two-way street: It can benefit you and your family as much as the cause you choose to help. Dedicating your time as a volunteer helps you make new friends, expand your network, and boost your social skills.

Make new friends and contacts

One of the best ways to [make new friends](/articles/relationships-communication/making-good-friends.htm) (/articles/relationships-communication/making-good-friends.htm) and strengthen existing relationships is to commit to a shared activity together. Volunteering is a great way to meet new people, especially if you are new to an

area. It strengthens your ties to the community and broadens your support network, exposing you to people with common interests, neighborhood resources, and fun and fulfilling activities.

Increase your social and relationship skills

While some people are naturally outgoing, others are shy and have a hard time meeting new people. Volunteering gives you the opportunity to practice and develop your social skills, since you are meeting regularly with a group of people with common interests. Once you have momentum, it's easier to branch out and make more friends and contacts.

Volunteering as a family

Children watch everything you do. By giving back to the community, you show them firsthand how volunteering makes a difference and how good it feels to help other people and animals and enact change. It's also a valuable way for you to get to know organizations in the community and find resources and activities for your children and family.

Benefit 2: Volunteering is good for your mind and body

Volunteering provides many benefits to both mental and physical health.

Volunteering helps counteract the effects of stress, anger, and anxiety. The social contact aspect of helping and working with others can have a profound effect on your overall psychological well-being. Nothing relieves stress better than a meaningful connection to another person. [Working with pets](/articles/mental-health/mood-boosting-power-of-dogs.htm) (/articles/mental-health/mood-boosting-power-of-dogs.htm) and other animals has also been shown to improve mood and reduce stress and anxiety.

Volunteering combats depression. Volunteering keeps you in regular contact with others and helps you develop a solid support system, which in turn protects you against depression.

Volunteering makes you happy. By measuring hormones and brain activity, researchers have discovered that being helpful to others delivers immense pleasure. Human beings are hard-wired to give to others. The more we give, the happier we feel.

Volunteering increases self-confidence. You are doing good for others and the community, which provides a natural sense of accomplishment. Your role as a volunteer can also give you a sense of pride and identity. And the better you feel about yourself, the more likely you are to have a positive view of your life and future goals.

Volunteering provides a sense of purpose. Older adults, especially those who have retired or lost a spouse, can find new meaning and direction in their lives by helping others. Whatever your age or life situation, volunteering can help take your mind off your own worries, keep you mentally stimulated, and add more zest to your life.

Volunteering helps you stay physically healthy. Studies have found that those who volunteer have a lower mortality rate than those who do not. Older volunteers tend to walk more, find it easier to cope with everyday tasks, are less likely to develop high blood pressure, and have better thinking skills. Volunteering can also lessen symptoms of chronic pain and reduce the risk of heart disease.

I have limited mobility—can I still volunteer?

People with disabilities or chronic health conditions can still benefit greatly from volunteering. In fact, research has shown that adults with disabilities or health conditions ranging from hearing and vision loss to heart disease, diabetes or digestive disorders all show improvement after volunteering.

Whether due to a disability, a lack of transportation, or time constraints, many people choose to volunteer their time via phone or computer. In today's digital age many organizations need help with writing, graphic design, email, and other web-based tasks. Some organizations may require you to attend an initial training session or periodical meetings while others can be done completely remotely. In any volunteer situation, make sure that you are getting enough social contact, and that the organization is available to support you should you have questions.

Benefit 3: Volunteering can advance your career

If you're considering a new career, volunteering can help you get experience in your area of interest and meet people in the field. Even if you're not planning on changing careers, volunteering gives you the opportunity to practice important skills used in the workplace, such as teamwork, communication, problem solving, project planning, task management, and organization. You might feel more comfortable stretching your wings at work once you've honed these skills in a volunteer position first.

Gaining career experience

Volunteering offers you the chance to try out a new career without making a long-term commitment. It is also a great way to gain experience in a new field. In some fields, you can volunteer directly at an organization that does the kind of work you're interested in. For example, if you're interested in nursing, you could volunteer at a hospital or a nursing home.

Your volunteer work might also expose you to professional organizations or internships that could be of benefit to your career.

Teaching you valuable job skills

Just because volunteer work is unpaid does not mean the skills you learn are basic. Many volunteering opportunities provide extensive training. For example, you could become an experienced crisis counselor while volunteering for a women's shelter or a knowledgeable art historian while donating your time as a museum docent.

Volunteering can also help you build upon skills you already have and use them to benefit the greater community. For instance, if you hold a successful sales position, you raise awareness for your favorite cause as a volunteer advocate, while further developing and improving your public speaking, communication, and marketing skills.

When it comes to volunteering, passion and positivity are the only requirements

While learning new skills can be beneficial to many, it's not a requirement for a fulfilling volunteer experience. Bear in mind that the most valuable skills you can bring to any volunteer effort are compassion, an open mind, a willingness to do whatever is needed, and a positive attitude.

Benefit 4: Volunteering brings fun and fulfillment to your life

Volunteering is a fun and easy way to explore your interests and passions. Doing volunteer work you find meaningful and interesting can be a relaxing, energizing escape from your day-to-day routine of work, school, or family commitments. Volunteering also provides you with renewed creativity, motivation, and vision that can carry over into your personal and professional life.

Many people volunteer in order to make time for hobbies outside of work as well. For

instance, if you have a desk job and long to spend time outdoors, you might consider volunteering to help plant a community garden, walk dogs for an animal shelter, or help out at a children's camp.

Consider your goals and interests

You will have a richer and more enjoyable volunteering experience if you first take some time to identify your goals and interests. Think about why you want to volunteer. What would you enjoy doing? The opportunities that match both your goals and your interests are most likely to be fun and fulfilling.

Tips for getting started

First, ask yourself if there is something specific you want to do.

For example, do I want...

- ...to make it better around where I live
- ...to meet people who are different from me
- ...to try something new
- ...to do something with my spare time
- ...to see a different way of life and new places
- ...to have a go at the type of work I might want to do as a full-time job
- ...to do more with my interests and hobbies
- ...to do something I'm good at

The best way to volunteer is to match your personality and interests. Having answers to these questions will help you narrow down your search.

Source: *World Volunteer Web*

How to find the right volunteer opportunity

There are numerous volunteer opportunities available. The key is to find a volunteer position that you would enjoy and are capable of doing. It's also important to make sure that your commitment matches the organization's needs. Ask yourself the following:

- ▶ Would you like to work with adults, children, animals, or remotely from home?
- ▶ Do you prefer to work alone or as part of a team?
- ▶ Are you better behind the scenes or do you prefer to take a more visible role?
- ▶ How much time are you willing to commit?

- ▶ What skills can you bring to a volunteer job?
- ▶ What causes are important to you?

Consider several volunteer possibilities

Don't limit yourself to just one organization or one specific type of job. Sometimes an opportunity looks great on paper, but the reality is quite different. Try to visit different organizations and get a feel for what they are like and if you click with other staff and volunteers.

Where to find volunteer opportunities

- ▶ Community theatres, museums, and monuments
- ▶ Libraries or senior centers
- ▶ Service organizations such as Lions Clubs or Rotary Clubs
- ▶ Local animal shelters, rescue organizations, or wildlife centers
- ▶ Youth organizations, sports teams, and after-school programs
- ▶ Historical restorations, national parks, and conservation organizations
- ▶ Places of worship such as churches or synagogues
- ▶ Online databases such as those contained in the Resources section below

How much time should you volunteer?

Volunteering doesn't have to take over your life to be beneficial. In fact, research shows that just two to three hours per week, or about 100 hours a year, can confer the most benefits—to both you and your chosen cause. The important thing is to volunteer only the amount of time that feels comfortable to you. Volunteering should feel like a fun and rewarding hobby, not another chore on your to-do list.

Getting the most out of volunteering

You're donating your valuable time, so it's important that you enjoy and benefit from your volunteering. To make sure that your volunteer position is a good fit:

Ask questions. You want to make sure that the experience is right for your skills, your goals, and the time you want to spend. Sample questions to your volunteer coordinator might address your time commitment, if there's any training involved, who you will be working with, and what to do if you have questions during your experience.

Make sure you know what's expected. You should be comfortable with the organization and understand the time commitment. Consider starting small so that you don't over commit yourself at first. Give yourself some flexibility to change your focus if needed.

Don't be afraid to make a change. Don't force yourself into a bad fit or feel compelled to stick with a volunteer role you dislike. Talk to the organization about changing your focus or look for a different organization that's a better fit.

If volunteering overseas, choose carefully. Some volunteer programs abroad can cause more harm than good if they take much-needed paying jobs away from local workers. Look for volunteer opportunities with reputable organizations.

Enjoy yourself. The best volunteer experiences benefit both the volunteer and the organization. If you're not enjoying yourself, ask yourself why. Is it the tasks you're performing? The people you're working with? Or are you uncomfortable simply because the situation is new and unfamiliar? Pinpointing what's bothering you can help you decide how to proceed.

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